

**Reading:** Matthew 13.31-35,44-53

**The Message:** The Exhilarating Promise

[Video](#)

One day about 2000 years ago Jesus sat in a boat on the lake that the New Testament calls the Sea of Galilee and spoke to a crowd of people who were on the beach listening to him. That talk is recorded in Matthew 13, and we just heard several verses from that chapter. Jesus' talk that day was entirely in parables. A parable is a kind of comparison, and almost all his parables in chapter 13 begin, "The kingdom of heaven is like ...". Like a mustard seed, like leaven, like a pearl, like a treasure in a field.

So all of his parables were about the kingdom of heaven, which most people think is the same as what in the gospels of Mark and Luke is called the kingdom of God. The kingdom of heaven is at the very heart of the message of Jesus. The first thing we hear about the public ministry of Jesus in the gospel of Mark is that he goes into Galilee saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand.

Now, if we ask what the kingdom of heaven means for Jesus, he's a little evasive. He doesn't give us propositional definitions. He speaks only in these short parables or comparisons or illustrations. So through the centuries people have disagreed about what he means.

- Is the kingdom of God a kind of social existence or is it something spiritual?
- Is it outside us or inside us or among us?
- Is it a place or a kind of relationship?
- Is it for everyone or only for Christian believers?
- Is it already here or is it yet to come?
- Is it something that God gives to us or is it something that we help God build up?

I can't give you answers to that, and apparently Jesus didn't want to give you answers to that. It's as if he didn't want to give us answers and doctrines, but just wanted to build a relationship with us where we could come to trust him.

So today's Scripture says that without a parable Jesus told the crowds nothing. This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet: 'I will open my mouth to speak in parables: I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world.' The mysteries of God can't be reduced to descriptions and simple statements; we have to open ourselves to the mysteries.

Jesus points to the kingdom of God with parables that suggest it's something we look for, something that grows, something that surprises us, a place where we have a meal, a place of forgiveness and liberation.

Now, although Jesus doesn't spell things out pedantically, there are things that the crowds already know because they know something about Jewish history. They know that when the people of Israel first came to the land of promise, they didn't have a government. The one who looked after them was God. When a particular issue arose, God raised a special leader, like Deborah, and when the crisis passed, the leader went home. And they had judges, like elders, to give good

advice. But in 1 Samuel 8, the people of Israel decide they want a king. All the nations around them have kings, and they think they should have a king too, just like the others. So they get Samuel to ask God for a king, and God's feelings are kind of hurt; God says, they have rejected me as king. But God gave them a king, and for the next several hundred years, the people of Israel had kings. And some of the kings were good, especially David, who loved the Lord and protected his people and honoured the covenant of Israel with God. But, unfortunately, most were bad. Then the kingship ended when the Babylonian armies invaded after about 600 CE. But the people of Israel yearned for a king once again. Some of the prophets, like Micah, look forward to a day when God again will be king. When Jesus speaks of the kingdom of God, the crowds probably know that he's speaking of the return of the rule of God, just like in the early days of the land of Israel, only better.

Because the fact is, human power structures are pretty imperfect. Most of us probably feel pretty privileged to live in Canada, but we also know that this is a country where Indigenous peoples have been dispossessed of land unfairly, where visible minorities face headwinds, where there are incidents of corruption and exploitation. Jesus' teaching is that God can do better. He doesn't give a blueprint for what it would look like for God to govern us, and he doesn't need to, because the kingdom of God isn't something that we create, it's something which God has already planned.

As for whether the kingdom of God is already here or whether it's yet to come, maybe the best way to think of it is that it's already but not yet. That's what Jesus seems to say in the first two parables we heard today. It's like a mustard seed which starts out very small, but grows into something very large and very hospitable, it gives shade in the hot sun and it welcomes birds to nest. It's like a little bit of yeast; you add a couple of teaspoons to a big lump of dough and pound it out, and the lump of dough begins to rise organically. The love of God that we know in our lives, the hope of God that's proclaimed in Scriptures, the promises of God that we look for in faith, are like leaven in our own lives and in our church lives and in the life of the world. It's already here, and it's growing like a mustard tree, it's rising like bread dough.

And as we look for the kingdom of God, like a treasure hidden in a field, or like a pearl of great value, the promise is exhilarating. Jesus says that the person in the parable who hides the treasure in a field goes and sells everything with great joy in order to buy the field where the treasure is. For the kingdom of God we're more than willing to give up all worldly advantage, because it's way better than anything else we know.

And finally in today's reading Jesus talks about the vocation of religious teachers who are trained for the kingdom of heaven. I think that these are people like you and me, who talk to one another and to our children and maybe to our friends about our hope. We're like the head of a household whose possessions include old things and new things; maybe we throw a party and bring out some fine old china but also some new recipes. The treasury of our faith includes the Scriptures and wisdom of the past, but Jesus says we also learn to read the signs of the times. We look around ourselves and we see where the kingdom of God is leavening the lump and where the mustard tree is growing among the weeds. Maybe we see around us signs of the dismantling of historic injustices, or signs of compassion for the sick and the vulnerable. Maybe when we see something as simple as a mask that we wear to make sure that someone else won't catch germs from us that we don't know we have, maybe there we see an element of God's compassion for the vulnerable and God's will for health and wholeness. For the kingdom of God which is already among us and growing, for the hope that nothing can separate us from the love that is in Christ Jesus, thanks be to God!